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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION REJECTS PROPOSED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY
CRITERIA

REF: A. TUNIS 298
[B.](#) TUNIS 278
[C.](#) TUNIS 144

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Leaders of Tunisia's two most credible independent opposition parties told the Ambassador on March 28 that President Ben Ali's March 21 announcement regarding candidacy requirements (Ref A) was specifically designed to exclude his strongest opponents from running for president in 2009. Nejib Chebbi and Maya Jribi of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and Mustapha Ben Jaafar of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) released statements protesting the announced criteria for candidacy, which prevents all independent opposition party leaders except for Maya Jribi from running for president. Chebbi, Jribi, and Ben Jaafar told the Ambassador they would lobby for broader criteria in the period before Ben Ali's declaration becomes law. They also advocated general elections-related reforms and asked that the Ambassador encourage the GOT to accept international elections observers. The Ambassador plans to meet with the ambassadors of like-minded countries to discuss coordinating elections-reform efforts. End Summary.

So You Want to be President...

[12.](#) (C) On March 21, President Ben Ali announced that all current elected political party secretary generals who had held that position for at least two years would be allowed to run for president in 2009 (Ref A). Tunisia's constitutional candidacy requirements effectively prohibit all opposition candidates from running (Ref B), thus the president typically announces additional elections-specific candidacy legislation several months before elections. The President's criteria exclude the only opposition figure to date who has announced his intention to run for president: former Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Secretary General Nejib Chebbi (Ref C). Chebbi had already received the endorsement of the majority of his party, and that of several prominent independent activists and intellectuals. Ben Ali's announcement likely also prevents Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL) Secretary General Mustapha Ben Jaafar from running, as he is his party's secretary general by virtue of being the party's founder, not as the result of a party election. It is unclear whether the GOT will consider affirmation by the FDTL's political bureau that Ben Jaafar's

position represents the equivalent of an elected office. Similarly, though Green Party for Progress (PVP) Secretary General Mongi Khamassi has already told us that he will endorse Ben Ali for president, he does not appear qualified to run himself, because he is Secretary General of the PVP because he founded it, not as the result of party-wide elections.

¶3. (C) The most likely interpretation of Ben Ali's March 21 announcement excludes two opposition parties (the FDTL and the PVP) from presenting presidential candidates entirely, while the PDP's only legal candidate would be its current Secretary General Maya Jribi, who was elected Secretary

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General in December 2006. Age limits in the constitution preclude Secretary General Ismail Boulahia of the opposition Social Democratic Movement (MDS) from running in 2009. As Ben Ali's announcement prevents anyone else in the MDS from running for president, the MDS (Tunisia's largest opposition party) will not be able to present a candidate during the 2009 elections. The opposition Social Liberal Party (PSL) and the PVP parties have already endorsed President Ben Ali's candidacy. This leaves the PDP, Popular Unity Party (PUP), Et-Tajdid, and Unionist Democratic Party (UDU) as the only parties that might legally present presidential candidates in 2009.

¶4. (C) The first elections-specific candidacy law was passed just before the 1999 presidential elections. It stipulated that eligible candidates needed to have held the office of president or secretary general of their party for five consecutive years and have at least one representative in the Chamber of Deputies. This law disqualified candidates from the PDP (then known as the Socialist Progressive Rally or RSP), as it had no representatives in parliament. The 2004 elections law required that eligible candidates be

members of a party's executive council, as long as they had held that position for five consecutive years and had at least one representative in the Chamber of Deputies. The 2004 law also disqualified candidates from the PDP and FDTL, as they still had no members in parliament; the PDP boycotted the 2004 elections to protest procedural irregularities and severely restricted access to the media.

"Managing" Democracy

¶5. (C) In a March 28 meeting with the Ambassador, Chebbi, Jribi, and Ben Jaafar expressed ire that the GOT continues to dictate who their candidates can be, rather than leaving such a critical decision to the parties. The opposition leaders said they would advocate broader criteria for candidates in the window before the president's announcement becomes law. For now, Chebbi will continue his campaign for president, and noted that should his bid be disqualified by law, he will not run for parliament instead. Chebbi told the Ambassador he plans to campaign in Europe the week of March 31 to reach the Tunisian diaspora and obtain better access to media outlets. Jribi added that Chebbi was the PDP's chosen presidential candidate and the party would continue to support his candidacy. According to Chebbi, in meetings around the country, which the GOT has allowed to go forward, Chebbi has reportedly been attracting crowds of about 100 people, and his campaign mailing list has over 11,000 subscribers. His campaign, Chebbi said, has focused on dialogue and new policies addressing the increasing costs of basic goods, and rising unemployment. (Note: His campaign website is www.nejibchebbi.com.) Chebbi and Ben Jaafar had no doubt that the new candidacy requirements were likely written so as to specifically preclude their candidacies. When pressed, Jribi did not say whether she might run in place of Chebbi, but she left the door open. It was clear, though, that the PDP plans to promote Chebbi's candidacy as long as possible.

¶6. (C) Chebbi, Jribi, and Ben Jaafar also remarked that

there are a number of issues with the elections themselves that they hope to address. Ben Jaafar complained that independent opposition parties have limited access to the media, experience difficulty meeting freely, and encounter obstacles such as restrictive candidacy laws that limit political participation. For example, Ben Jaafar stated that during the 2004 elections, polling stations that could have been consolidated into one room were instead divided into three or four, which made it more difficult for elections observers to monitor proceedings. He opined that as long as the Ministry of the Interior runs elections, free and fair elections are not possible in Tunisia. Ben Jaafar concluded that Tunisia's two greatest obstacles regarding elections are transparency and candidacy restrictions. Chebbi responded that the larger issue was political participation. He opined that even if the PDP was "allowed" to gain representation in parliament, it would do little to foster a true political dialogue between the government and the people. In the short term, all three opposition members expressed an interest in international elections observers. They dismissed the National Elections Observatory, whose members are appointed, as ineffectual without real enforcement capabilities. They opined that international pressure is the only way to effect GOT compliance with international standards.

Comment

¶7. (C) The fact that three of the eight authorized political parties (the FDTL, MDS, and PVP) will not be able to present their candidates of choice has not escaped the notice of civil society. Independent opposition members are probably correct in their assertion that the criteria were specifically designed to exclude both Chebbi and Ben Jaafar from running for president. There is little doubt that President Ben Ali will win the election, assuming he chooses to run, regardless of Nejib Chebbi's candidacy. That the GOT has opted to legally prevent Chebbi from running is probably indicative of the personal animus Ben Ali feels toward his would-be competitor, presumably because of his ties with moderate Islamists. That the criteria appear crafted to also disallow Ben Jaafar's candidacy would seem to confirm the explanation Chebbi offered: "Anything not under Ben Ali's complete control is considered the enemy."

¶8. (C) The Ambassador will meet with like-minded ambassadors on April 4 to discuss coordinating

elections-related reform efforts, including urging the GOT to accept international elections observers. End Comment.
GODEC